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THE TWO-FOLD PROBLEM: TOWARD AN ATHANASIAN ATONEMENT MODEL

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“And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:8).”¹ This one sentence summarizes a vast and incomprehensible truth that all Christians must grapple with. In this sentence the Apostle Paul aptly summarizes the central tenet of our faith. Namely, that the eternal Son came down, assumed a complete human nature, and for our salvation died on a Roman cross. This reality, this paradox, lies at the very center of Christian theology, faith, practice, and salvation.

Nearly three centuries later another saint of the faith would describe this axiomatic reality. This young man would eventually become the famous Bishop of Alexandria. In his foundational work, *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius would masterfully describe the purpose, necessity, and effect of the assumption of human nature into the very person of the eternal and divine *Logos*. Although the primary purpose of the work is a description and defense of the incarnation of Christ, Athanasius also devotes a substantial portion of the work to address the question of Christ’s sacrificial death and to briefly explore the effects of that death.

However, shortly after this work was written² the Arian controversy would break and a large majority of Athanasius efforts, both written and spoken, would be spent directly combating this destructive heresy. As such, Athanasius became primarily a theologian that scholars look to when exploring early Christian understandings of the full divinity of Christ and how the incarnation interacts with that reality. Because of this emphasis on the incarnation, the atoning work on the cross is sometimes seen as something of an afterthought. This majority position seems particularly tenuous given what I have termed *Athanasius’ Two Fold Problem*. Athanasius

¹ All Scripture quotations appear in the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

² Although scholarly consensus favors a later date of ca. AD 340 for the authorship of *On the Incarnation*, I am unconvinced and still hold to an early date of ca. AD 318. Since both positions rely primarily on inferences and hearsay, and since the dating of the work does not drastically alter the argument put forward in this essay I shall leave the dating of the work untreated.

seems to present that humans have two distinct, but related, problems. One is solved by the incarnation itself, while the other is solved by Christ's atoning death. It is to this second problem and its solution that I turn my attention. In this paper I intend to demonstrate that the atonement theology of Athanasius is more robust than the current scholarship suggests, and in doing so I hope to call scholars in the field of Patristic Theology to delve deeper the writings of the Bishop of Alexandria. I shall demonstrate this gap by first identifying the passages of *On the Incarnation* and *Against the Arians* that do not seem to be adequately addressed by the corpus of scholarly literature. Then I shall summarize the prevailing thoughts of recent scholarship in the area, explaining why it does not approach the aforementioned gap sufficiently. Finally I shall present a brief summary of my hypothesis in regard to the answer to this open question.³

On the Incarnation is a brief, but dense, theological treatise penned by Athanasius primarily to serve as a defense and apologetic to a non-Christian, pagan audience. This is seen most clearly in the close association it has with a text called *Against the Gentiles*.⁴ Although the text focuses primarily, as the title would suggest, on the incarnation itself, we see that there is also a treatment of hamartiology, and of the doctrine of the work of Christ in dying on the cross. It is in these two sections that I find the largest challenge to the prevailing interpretations of this work. When reading section four of *On the Incarnation* we come across the explanation that Athanasius sets forward for why human beings die. He writes "the transgression of the commandment returned them to the natural state, so that, just as they, not being, came to be, so also they might rightly endure in time the corruption unto non-being (*At De Inc* §1)." To put that

³ Although I believe my hypothesis stands on solid ground, I have not found sufficient secondary source support to argue this position conclusively. My hypothesis should thus be held loosely and with appropriate skepticism.

⁴ The two texts are so closely associated that they are sometimes called the *Double Essay*. I will refer to them occasionally as such in this essay.

another way, humans left to their natural course will return to the state of non-existence from which they were called forth. That is, since humans entered creation *ex nihilo* they will exit creation *in nihilum*. “For the human being is by nature mortal, having come into being from nothing (*Ath De Inc* §1).” Humans only remain immortal due to their union and fellowship with the Word, upon the break of fellowship with the Word in the Fall they return to their natural state which will progressively drift toward non-existence. This drift toward non-existence is what Athanasius calls the natural power of death. This power is not legislative or juridical in nature, and is better thought of as a natural consequence of separation from the *Logos*.⁵ This is the first of Athanasius’ two fold problem, and is remedied by the incarnation. The Son takes on a human nature in the incarnation, and in doing so restores the union between humans and the *Logos*, thereby restoring the eternality of humanity broadly and human persons individually. This interpretation is the standard understanding of Athanasian atonement theology, and as we’ll see in the next section of the essay it is sometimes seen as the only substantial atonement theology present in Athanasius. However, this position fails to recognize that the very next passage contributes a second problem to be solved. Athanasius continues and says, “When this happened, human beings died and corruption thenceforth prevailed against them, becoming **even stronger than its natural power** (*Ath De Inc* §5).” This increased strength is a result of “the threat of the Deity against them through the transgression of the commandment (*Ath De Inc* §5).” What we see here is that separation from the Son resulted in a return to the natural state of humanity drifting *in nihilum* due to their wilful separation from their source of existence. However, this natural power of death somehow is intensified by the fact that God forewarned them by means of

⁵ A helpful analogy is that of drowning. If someone holds themselves under water they are separating themselves from their source of air. It would be nonsensical to frame this in juridical language when they drown, they simply succumbed to the natural consequences of separating themselves from air.

commandment. This language is very different than the natural consequence language we saw in the previous page, and becomes increasingly juridical as the work progresses toward his explanation of the death of Christ in sections seven through ten. This position is strengthened especially in section seven when Athanasius writes “If then there were only offence and not the consequence of corruption, repentance would have been fine (*Ath De Inc* §7).” Although here Athanasius is making an argument in support of the first problem, it speaks to the fact that he sees two discrete problems. The first is “offense” which repentance could have solved. The second is the “consequence of corruption,” which Athanasius has already argued is solved by the union of the *Logos* and human nature. The culmination of this line of argumentation is found when he explains Hebrews 2:15-15 saying “For by the sacrifice of his own body, he both put an end to the law lying against us and renewed for us the source of life (*Ath De Inc* §10).” Note that there is the renewal of life, problem one, and an end to the law’s power over us, problem two.

Although this two fold problem is most explicitly present in *On the Incarnation* we see echoes of it in other works as well. Due to the brief nature of this essay, I have chosen only to treat the work *Against the Arians*.⁶ As I alluded to in the opening of this essay, after the break of the Arian controversy, Athanasius’ work became more explicitly polemic against Arianism than we see in *On the Incarnation* which is devoid entirely of reference to Arianism or Arius.⁷ As such, he spent more time refuting the primary error of Arius, namely that the Son is indeed fully God in the same way that the Father is. However, we see in book three of *Against the Arians* that

⁶ Choosing this work serves a dual purpose. First, *Against the Arians* is often treated as a second most complete expression of Athanasius’ incarnation theology, with *On the Incarnation* being the first. For this reason it makes a logical supporting primary source to root my theory in. Secondly, *Against the Arians* was composed around the same time as the most commonly purported late date for *On the Incarnation*. For this reason, even if I am incorrect about the dating of *On the Incarnation* the fact that this phenomena appears in both texts hedges my theory against criticism rooted in the dating of the work.

⁷ Additionally, there is no reference to the Council of Nicaea or to the Creed of Nicaea, which seems unusual if these two authoritative entities had already happened.

Athanasius, in defending the incarnation as God himself taking on human flesh, tackles the subject of impassibility and suffering.⁸ This, at first blush, does not seem to address our inquiry, but as we read further we see that the suffering of a human body was central to the purposes of the incarnation. Starting in section 32 the topic shifts to defending the fact that it was indeed the *Logos* as God incarnate who was suffering, rather than some kind of quasi- or pseudo- human nature. This full assumption of a complete human nature, here as well as in *On the Incarnation*, restores humanity to its pre-fall state of incorruptibility. Athanasius writes “Furthermore, if the properties of the flesh had not been reckoned to the Logos, humanity would not have been completely liberated from them (*Ath Cont Ari* §32).” This speaks to the first of the two problems which was earlier called the natural power of death over humanity. However, we again see a contrast between this problem and another problem. In the same section Athanasius argues “Many people, after all, have become holy and clean from all sin (*Ath Cont Ari* §33),” implying that there is a distinction between the removal of sin and guilt, and the restoration of the human nature. But regardless “human beings continued to be moral and corruptible nonetheless, subject to the passions that belong to their nature (*Ath Cont Ari* §33).” To solve this second problem, Athanasius turns to the reality of the suffering Christ. However, rather than simply turning to the death on the cross Athanasius turns to suffering broadly. This suffering, says Athanasius, serves the purpose of destroying the passions of the human nature. By the very act of suffering, Christ takes into himself the passions and sins of humanity and destroys them. This culminates in section 33 when Athanasius finally associates this suffering with Christ’s sacrificial death which

⁸ An additional vector of my hypothesis is that since the Arian controversy primarily surrounded the nature of Christ both prior to and after the incarnation that the cross took a back seat in the controversy. This would explain why *Against the Arians* focuses primarily on impassibility and suffering as the substitutionary event, rather than the cross, since the substitutionary aspect of the cross was rather uncontroversial.

resulted in Christ himself not only taking our curse, but himself becoming accursed for us.

Athanasius writes

Just as we die in Adam because we are all from the earth, so “we are all made alive in Christ” because we are “reborn” from above “by water and the Spirit;” the flesh is no longer earthly, but now it has been “logified” by the work of the divine Logos who on our account became flesh (*Ath Cont Ari* §33).⁹

This at first seems to support a reading which associates this with the first problem, however as we continue to read in section 34 we see that it is through the suffering that we are made one with God, and not exclusively through the unification of our flesh with the *Logos*.

To briefly summarize, we see throughout the works discussed that Athanasius identifies two distinct problems that are present in the human condition as a result of our disobedience to God in the Garden and consequentially our separation from the *Logos*. The first of these two is that our natures, having come from nothing, return to nothing once the sustaining power of the *Logos* is no longer unified with them. In *On the Incarnation* we see this referred to primarily in terms of corruptibility and natural consequence. In *Against the Arians* we see this as physical death and alienation from God. In both cases, while the incarnation of the Son is sufficient to restore an ontological unity with the *Logos* to humans, it does not address the second problem. This second problem, couched primarily in juridical terminology in *On the Incarnation* and in bondage language in *Against the Arians*, is only solved by the substitutionary suffering of the incarnate Christ, culminating in the death of God the Son on the cross. In *Against the Arians* this suffering serves to take the human passions into the flesh of Christ and be destroyed by this suffering,⁹ and in *On the Incarnation* it serves to fulfil the juridical obligation of death incumbent

⁹ An interesting point and something that would be served well by further research is that the ascetic practice of self-denial and self-flagellation echoes the idea of destroying the passions by means of suffering. It would be interesting to trace the influence of this monastic practice on the theology of suffering presented here and elsewhere in Athanasius corpus of writing.

upon all humans as a result of the transgression of God's legislation. In addition, the suffering of Christ culminating in his bearing of the curse also breaks the expanded power that death has beyond its natural boundaries.

Although my summary of the role of the incarnation in Athanasius soteriology is essentially undisputed, my interpretation of the role of the cross and suffering in Athanasius is somewhat contentious. It is my view that this is a glaring hole in our understanding of this brilliant theologian's work. Often times we must realize that the traditions that are handed down to us cause us to miss obvious things in our interpretation. Coming from a Reformed background and having had this poignantly shown to me recently I will use the example given by my Professor, Donald Fairbairn. Ephesians chapter two is often held up as a hallmark text for the doctrine of Justification, especially by Reformed thinkers. So fundamental to my own theology of Justification is this text that I have a phrase from the chapter tattooed on my right arm to remind me that my justification is by grace alone through faith alone. What Prof. Fairbairn so aptly pointed out is that the doctrine presented in Ephesians chapter two is framed in terms of life and death, not in the juridical language so prominent in justification theology. Now, this does not mean that that chapter is *not* talking about the doctrine of justification, simply that we must always remember to return to the object of our interpretive inquiry and allow it to speak first in its own voice before we begin to attempt to fit the text into our greater interpretive and systematic grid. In my opinion, something to the same effect has happened in the area of Athanasian studies. For so many years the prevailing Eastern view of Athanasius' theology, predominantly read through the lens of Maximus and Palamas, has so dominated the theological landscape that it seems as though some interpreters are ignoring what I see to be obvious issues with that interpretation. In this section of the paper I will explore the most prevalent ways of

handling Athanasius' thought. Although these are not clear-cut schools of thought and many authors fit into multiple camps, I have identified two basic ways of treating the two-fold problem identified above.

The first problematic reading is to treat the incarnation as though it is the entire locus of redemption, with death and suffering seen simply as a part of life that comes with the territory. This is especially prominent in Eastern Orthodox thought, (Lints 2012, 285) and those influenced by it. Lest I state my case too strongly, it is important to note that I agree that the incarnation does take a more prominent role in the theology of Athanasius, however this view minimizes the death of Christ to an unhealthy extreme. This tension is recognized by Jeffery Finch when he titles a section regarding Athanasius' doctrine of *theosis* "By the Incarnation Alone?" (Finch 2006, 115) Finch's does not actually fall in this category of thinkers, but I include his title to demonstrate that the idea that *theosis* by means of the incarnation as the only source of soteriological import is a real tension and genuine, albeit a bit caricatured, perspective on the table. One such example of this view is prevalent in the interpretation given by Peter Leithart when he writes "His body was like all human bodies mortal, and so he to 'surrendered His body to death in place of all, and offered to the Father' (*On the Incarnation* 8)." (Leithart 2011, 155 - Primary Source quotation in original) For Leithart, we see that dying is simply a part of human nature and does not necessarily serve any sort of objective purpose. That is to say the exchange between humans and Christ is not forensic in the sense that it fulfills any sort of moral or legal obligation, rather it is a part of the broader exchange that happens in the process of incarnation and *theosis* that is the primary focus of Athanasius' theology. To frame it into my two fold problem, death and suffering is part of the restoration of human nature to fellowship and union with the Word and resolves the natural power that death has over natural humanity. However, as

I demonstrated earlier this ignores the fact that beyond the natural power of death, death possesses a greater juridical based power because God had forewarned them of the penalty of transgression. Although Leithart does acknowledge that Athanasius speaks in terms of debt, he argues that Athanasius “does not express this in terms of Jesus vicariously receiving the punishment we deserve.” (Leithart 2011, 154) A similar perspective is portrayed by Norman Russell in *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*. This perspective is not revealed so much by what Russell says, but by what he doesn’t say. Granted, Russell’s purpose is not to explain the role that Christ’s death on the cross, however even when quoting passages of Athanasius that explicitly refer to Christ’s death and suffering, the role of Christ’s death in *theosis* or redemption is not addressed at all.¹⁰ One author even goes so far as to summarize the role of Christ’s death as the *Logos* simply being pleased “to distance himself from his body for a time.” (Popov 2011, 49) Other authors give a cursory head-nod to the concept of death paying the debt of humanity, but tend to minimize that as a somewhat allegorical or metaphorical statement. One such example presents in *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*. After that stating that with the death of Christ “the debt to God’s honour was paid and death itself was overcome,” the author then argues that salvation is predominantly a matter of re-creation and that death merely provides the platform in which “humanity was re-created when the body of the *Logos* was raised and clothed in incorruptibility.” (Young and Teal 2010, 55) Even the venerable Reformed theologian, Herman Bavinck, argues that the focus in Eastern Theology—in which he includes Athanasius—is on “his incarnation rather than on his satisfaction.” (Bavinck 2006, 255) This is echoed by his junior contemporary, Geerhardus Vos. Vos argues that on the Greek patristic model of deification “the element of guilt naturally recedes into the background.” (Vos 2014,

¹⁰ For the most glaring example see Russell’s quotation of *De Descetis* 14 in (Russell 2004, 175).

163) Finally, another position that minimizes the objective results of the cross is what one might call the demonstrative/epistemological position. That is, that Christ's death on the cross simply demonstrated his humanity or revealed God to the world. One such expression is advanced by Thomas Weinandy. In his treatment of the Double-Essay, he essentially argues that Christ died primarily as an apologetic for the incarnation, but that it "allow[s] Athanasius to reinforce his previous soteriological concerns." (Weinandy 2007, 38) Again, almost as an afterthought, we see the substitutionary aspect of Christ's death on the cross simply tacked on with little credence or weight. (Weinandy 2007, 39)

A second reading of Athanasius makes nearly the opposite mistake. If the first position is primarily forwarded by Eastern thinkers, the second is advanced primarily by Protestant Western thinkers. This error is to read back the insights of the Reformers into the writing of Athanasius. This position is tempting especially of late, and I have at times drifted into this position. This reading tends to follow the Evangelical error of minimizing the incarnation as simply a prerequisite to the penal substitution on the cross. Perhaps the most drastic example I came across is found in *Pillars of Grace* by Steven Lawson who not only reads back Penal Substitution, but locates all five of the so-called doctrines of grace in the writings of Athanasius. (Lawson 2010, 150-156) Another example is in the expansive treatment of the history of various doctrines by Gregg Allison in *Historical Theology*. Allison accurately represents Athanasius' atonement theology as substitutionary, but in so doing he places it in a direct trajectory of development that would ultimately lead to Augustine and later in a full blown Penal Substitution. (Allison 2011, 393-394) To preclude accusations that it is just Reformed theologians who make such an error, we see a similar interpretation made by Arminian historian Roger Olson when he

simply quotes Athanasius and, without any explanation or exposition, declares that this is substitutionary theology. (Olson 2011)

Given the nature of this paper and the general lack of representation of my position in the current scholarly landscape, I do not feel that it would be prudent to present a full orbbed statement of my position as though I have reached a settled conclusion. I do think however that there is a way forward and a potential solution that presents itself in the text of *On the Incarnation* with hints in other writings by Athanasius. Although some authors (Dragas 1991, 92) do recognize and make full use of the two fold problem and solution I discussed earlier, I think that further exploration of this concept would allow us to treat both the incarnation and crucifixion as objective solutions to objective problems, rather than relegating one to simply a prerequisite or consequence of the other.¹¹ This is explicit in *On the Incarnation*, but also fits nicely with the ideas present in *Against the Arians* surrounding suffering as an essential and objective part of the Athanasian atonement model. Furthermore, and something that I have not seen in the literature thus far, the immediate proximity of the citation of Romans 1:26-27 to the reference to this mysterious increased power death has as a result of the transgression leads me to hypothesize that this power is related to the wilful self-deception that Paul argues drives us

¹¹ Since the original writing of this paper in 2013, I am not aware of any significant focused research in this area. However, I am starting to see Reformed writers (of whom I am most familiar) begin to utilize these categories in various ways. For example, in the 2017 book by Michael Allen titled *Sanctification* we read the following.

Athanasius of Alexandria identified the twofold work of Christ as involving the way in which ‘by the sacrifice of his own body, he put both an end to the law lying against us and renewed for us the source of life, giving hope of the resurrection.’ (Allen 2017, 176)

Allen also identifies similar themes in Cyril of Alexandria who writes that Christ is “both the altar of incense since he is the pleasing aroma of sanctification and the altar of burnt offering since he is the sacrifice for the life of the world.” (Allen 2017, 176) It should not be too surprising that Allen and I have arrived at nearly the same conclusions, using nearly the same conclusions, for Allen makes heavy use of *Grace and Christology in the Early Church* by Donald Fairbairn who taught the course that this paper was originally submitted for. Similar themes are identified by Stephen Wellum in *Christ Alone* (2017, 162-165)

further and further into sin throughout the context of Romans 1 and 2. How exactly this self-deception, which itself is called the Wrath of God by Paul, is related to and solved by Christ's death on the cross is yet to be seen. However, I believe that this will provide fruitful ground for further research. In addition, I believe that although it is anachronistic to argue that Athanasius taught Reformed or Lutheran notions of Penal Substitution, it is also myopic to ignore the clear juridical and substitutionary language present throughout Athanasius' work. In fact Athanasius' atonement rationale is rooted in legal exchange language. (TeSelle 1996, 159) A more robust expression of how this language is used, and how it served—or didn't serve—as a foundation for later developments of Penal Substitution and Forensic Atonement is needed as well. In this essay I have demonstrated that the current scholarly landscape of Athanasian atonement theology insufficiently addresses the whole of Athanasius writings by providing an exposition of the problematic passages and addressing two of the most common interpretations that fail to fully explain the text. I have also provided a brief summary of my hypothesis in regard to how we may move forward and suggested two areas of further research that I believe we as Patristic scholars must explore in order to more completely understand not only what Athanasius is communicating, but also to fully understand what it means for Christ to take the form of a servant and obediently die on a cross.

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